



NEWS RELEASE

901 N. Stuart St., 10th Floor, Arlington, VA 22203

Office of Evaluation & Dissemination: Paula Durbin
Telephone: 703-306-4357
Facsimile: 703-306-4365
www.iaf.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Release No.: 803901-1
Date: Aug. 3, 2001
Pages: THREE

IAF PRESIDENT SPEAKS FOR U.S. DELEGATION AT OAS MINISTERS' MEETING

ARLINGTON, Va. — Inter-American Foundation President David Valenzuela reaffirmed the United States' endorsement of decentralization in the hemisphere when he addressed the Organization of American States' Meeting of Ministers and High Level Officials on Decentralization, Local Government and Citizen Participation, July 30 in La Paz, Bolivia.

The meeting, attended by representatives from 20 nations and numerous organizations, took place in the context of hemisphere-wide decentralization initiatives. As head of the U.S. delegation, Valenzuela delivered the delegation's statement. In his address, he emphasized the possibility of increased development at the grassroots level through partnerships involving local government, nongovernmental organizations and the business sector. He urged central governments to empower municipalities with sufficient resources and administrative authority.

Excerpts from Valenzuela's address follow:

"The United States, based on its own national experience, is committed to the belief that the consolidation of democracy in the region is a matter of the

highest priority in the struggle to reduce poverty and build just, stable, and peaceful societies in the region.

“Our programs of cooperation in the region reflect our beliefs. They have sought to foster and encourage the conditions for decentralization by supporting democratic practices at the grass roots, and local government capacity building. At the national level we have supported fiscal and judicial reform and strengthening the rule of law. One of the keys for the decentralization to work is the role of organized citizens in what we refer to as the civil society. Strong dynamic localities have active civil societies, engaged private business sector, and progressive elected officials. The partnership among local governments, civil society, and the private business sector is one of the cornerstones of successful communities and nations.

“Today, conditions for decentralization are more favorable than at any time in the recent past. More and more innovative practices for improving basic living conditions are being tested with success by communities, municipalities, and sub-national governments. Local spending as a percentage of total public sector spending is generally on the rise in some countries, but in others this increase has halted or reversed course. While it is true that municipalities are developing more financing options and becoming more adept at generating their own resources, they lag far behind developed countries in their access to resources as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. Most mayors must make heroic efforts to even begin to meet the expectations and needs of the citizenry, which more and more is turning to local governments for solutions.

“Unfortunately, time is running out for national governments of the region to resolutely re-affirm their political commitment to decentralization and move ahead without delay to resolve the administrative, fiscal and technical issues. It is not a question that decentralization is simply a fashion promoted by donor agencies. Decentralization in and of itself is not a solution. However, through long years of promoting development with disappointing levels of success, we have finally learned that without decentralization, we cannot begin to build an engaged citizenry, a culture of democratic practice, accountability, and the

enforcement of the rule of law. Without decentralization, we will be unable to unleash the energies of our populations who are the only ones who can begin to address the problems of poverty and hopelessness.

“While strong backing from national authorities is a vital element, any discussion of decentralization policies, programs and practices by national governments must enjoy the full participation of the other actors as equals, especially civil society and local governments.”

The potential of decentralization as a factor in poverty reduction and better living conditions was stressed by other speakers as well, including Bolivian President Jorge Quiroga, OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria, Fernando Carillo of the Inter-American Development Bank and John Graham of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities. Among other results, the meeting created a network of policy-makers responsible for decentralization reforms.

-###-

*Para clarificación en español o más detalles, llame al 703-306-4357.
For more details, call 703-306-4357.*